

Simple Rules a Program Manager Can Live By

Getting Back to the Basics

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With acquisition reform, reengineering, downsizing, rightsizing, and old-fashioned turmoil, a lot of interest from the public as well as the private sectors now focuses on how we, as program managers, do business. Because of this increased focus and interest, many organizations are attempting to quantify what they do.

Back to the Basics

In response to this growing interest, my experience and that of many other program managers tells me that we need to get back to the basics:

- What are we doing?
- How are we doing?
- How do we know?

Instituting planning charts, financial summary charts, and color-coded risk and status charts are not by themselves marks of progress. The team must actually understand and use the material. To do that, we need to employ the basics – planning a solid program using common sense and sound management techniques.

Some organizations appear to have lost sight of that. They're doing solid planning from a technical perspective, but not applying those same disciplined techniques to the business side. The tools we use to plan, organize, and evaluate should be just that – tools...but not an end in themselves. The rules that follow aren't new, exciting, or terribly insightful; but they

work, and may help you avoid some of the problems and pitfalls in getting the job done.

Step No. 1

Don't Try to Impress People by Building a Better Mouse Trap. In trying to express this concept in ways that are new and different, words fail me. Tired old phrases come to mind like "Don't reinvent the wheel" and "Don't fix what isn't broken" – neither of which is likely to hold anyone's attention. Regrettably, there's no fascinating way to say what we all know to be true: *The institutional resistance (inertia) of "not invented here" needs to be addressed up front.* Think about it. Why not borrow a good idea from another acquisition office, give the originator credit, improve the process or idea, and move on? This is much more efficient and productive than trying to come up with that one "brilliant idea" yourself.

With this philosophy in mind, keep an eye out for good ideas in your own organization. As the old saying goes, "You'd be surprised what you can accomplish if you don't mind who gets the credit." So see what works, and keep it. If what you have or what you've tried isn't working, start with Step No. 2.

Step No. 2

Know Who the Customer Really Is. The customer is the one who is putting up the financial resources – right? Well, most of the time. As an

example, the customer for U.S. Air Force combat fighters and bombers is the Air Combat Command (ACC). But when it comes to developing requirements, the acquisition community is ACC's customer. That's right. If the warfighter's requirements aren't nailed down, how can you acquire a system that they will be happy with? Moreover, if the requirements constantly change, and the customer doesn't seem to know what he or she wants, we have "Requirements Creep." And depending on who is in the meeting, "Requirements Creep" may be a noun or a verb.

Once your customer has understandable and definitive requirements, you must know what the cost, schedule, and performance parameters are and baseline the program. Yes, I said baseline! Without it, you won't be able to communicate to the customer what is required to successfully fulfill the requirement, and they won't know what to expect in return. Put another way, a baseline serves as the vehicle for establishing and tracking a common set of expectations.

In developing a program baseline that incorporates cost, schedule, and performance, don't forget that your project integrates with a lot of other products and processes, such as training, spare parts, or maintenance equipment. Some people develop a baseline as a document. I like to think of it as a set of briefing charts (which helps me stifle my own verbosity). Perhaps you will

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find, as I did, that most of the benefit of a simple baseline document (I recommend keeping it to six to eight charts) is in building it and coordinating with all the affected agencies, including the customer. As a forcing function, the baseline applies discipline in bringing the program together and ensures that its strategy is supportable.

Step No. 3

Get a Second Opinion. Suppose you went to the doctor for a standard check-up and received a dire prognosis. You would then likely seek a second opinion. Likewise, if your program receives word that it has a sudden illness, but it seems fine, get a second opinion. I know of a program manager who went “ballistic” after hearing that a piece of Government Furnished Equipment (GFE) was not going to be available for his program. After being “sliced and diced” by the customer, he finally had to elevate it to his supervisor. The supervisor then called a different “expert” point of contact and found there was plenty of the GFE item available.

The lesson to be learned from this true situation again takes us back to the basics. When things unexpectedly look bad, get a second opinion on the situation. The same is true for those times that you believe things are “headed south,” and your single point of contact says, “Don’t worry, be happy” — *get that second opinion.*

Step No. 4

All Software Development Is Moderate Risk. “What you see is not always what you get,” is a general rule of software development. While debugging and testing a program may reveal many hidden problems, these actions alone can not guarantee that all problems are detected. Historically, soft-

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ware has proven difficult to scope as well as insidiously susceptible to requirements growth. Keep this axiom in mind: “The more complex your solution, the more vulnerable it is to simple problems.” Be wary of magicians who claim that previously discovered hardware problems can be fixed with a simple software mod. One senior Program Director once told me his rule of thumb: no matter where you are in software development, you are always two years behind schedule and need twice as much money. *Expect it, plan for it, and manage it.*

Step No. 5

Know Your Program’s Status. Many organizations use color codes to communicate the health of the project. I have always been fascinated by the variety of definitions and the finite detail program managers use and confuse in defining whether a program, project or functional area is Green, Yellow, or Red. Depending on the management philosophy of the organization, Green, Yellow, or Red is usually the program manager’s own assessment.

For example, a problem may be coded different colors by different program managers. If the program is one month behind, do you evaluate it Red, Yellow, or Green? Well, the color really depends on when the customer needs it. Let me offer three simple definitions for you to consider when preparing color-coded future assessments.

If the program or project fills your day, keeps you challenged, and is a reason why they need you in government service, the program is Green.

If you ponder the day’s events on the drive home and know that your boss will be irritated to hear from someone other than you about the latest “fun” you are having, the program is Yellow.

*If the program or project fills your day, keeps you challenged, and is a reason why they need you in government service, the program is **Green**. If you ponder the days events on the drive home and know that your boss will be irritated to hear from someone other than you about the latest “fun” you are having, the program is **Yellow**. If you find yourself waking up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night considering other employment options, hoping that your boss can help you right the ship, the program is **Red**.*



If you find yourself waking up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night considering other employment options, hoping that your boss can help you right the ship, the program is Red.

Step No. 6

Follow the Money. Don't kid yourself. Everything we do is connected to money, and if we didn't control the

funding, no one would pay any attention to us. Start thinking of financial planning documents as program management planning documents because that's what they really are. Always be familiar with your financial situation and watch for the shell game. If you depend on too many good things to happen in order to be successful, you probably won't be. So, if you aren't managing the money, you aren't managing the program. *That's always the bottom line.*

Step No. 7

Summarize Meetings. Have you ever sat through a one-hour meeting listening to each and every member speak their mind? At the end of the meeting,



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with 15 suggestions from six people, it is difficult to know who plans to do what unless the program manager summarizes for the group what the course of action will be. If, at the end of your meeting, you haven't summarized a plan of action, you might find yourself rescheduling another meeting to do just that. Get yourself into the habit of summarizing each meeting and save time, effort, and a lot of headaches down the road.

Step No. 8

Use The Aunt Agnes Test. A situation develops that requires you, the program manager, to make a decision. But does the course of action you are about to select make sense? In acquisition, we have surrounded ourselves with processes, integrated acronym lists (IAL), and program management review teams, all of which can deprive us of our common sense. I've been taught to use this simple test:

Pretend you have an "Aunt Agnes" who owns a farm in Iowa where she grows corn. Can you explain the program and your decision to her? Would she understand it? Does it make sense? Can you defend the course of action to her? If the answer to any of these is "no," then rethink your strategy because you are about to lose your way. And don't bother looking up IAL – I made that up. You didn't know that? See? Unnecessary complexity will only confuse Aunt Agnes, and your customer. The defense rests.

Step No. 9

Make a Decision. We have all sat in meetings where a detailed, insightful discussion about the pros and cons of a project occurred to the nth degree. But in the end, no one knew what course of action the program manager agreed to. What did he really want? Did she say, go ahead? The difference between the program manager and a lot of process-oriented staff help is that you are required to make decisions. Don't forget that; if you don't, you will be out of a job.

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Sometimes the worst decision is no decision. Be careful not to get caught in this type of organizational paralysis. One senior acquisition leader once advised that "You need to go into the job assuming you have already been fired – only then will you be willing to make the right decisions." Take in the important details, look at the alternatives, understand the options, then make a decision and move on.

Step No. 10

Manage, But Don't Micromanage. Stay focused on the goals and ideas that are important to you, and stick to the basics. Watch the details without micromanaging your team. You can't always be there to answer the questions yourself, so you need to make sure your team knows what is going on. Treat everyone, including the contractor, with respect. And, dare I say it, have fun.

Being a program manager is a lot like being a utility infielder in baseball. You know what will make your effort successful, and you have a team full of functional experts to help you along the way. Let them know what you expect from them, and chances are they won't let you down. Remember, these jobs are 10 percent expertise and 90 percent common sense. To win the game, stick to the basics, focus on your goal, and rely on teamwork.

Above All, Keep It Simple

You don't get paid more for making it complicated, so stick to the basics. The tools for becoming a more effective program manager, which I've outlined in this article, are all quite simple. Every one of us has thought of them, but the actual working process can still be confusing. When you think you are losing control of a project, check to see if you are following these simple tips. Chances are you will quickly recognize how to fix it.